MEAT AND POULTRY LABELS WRAP IT UP...

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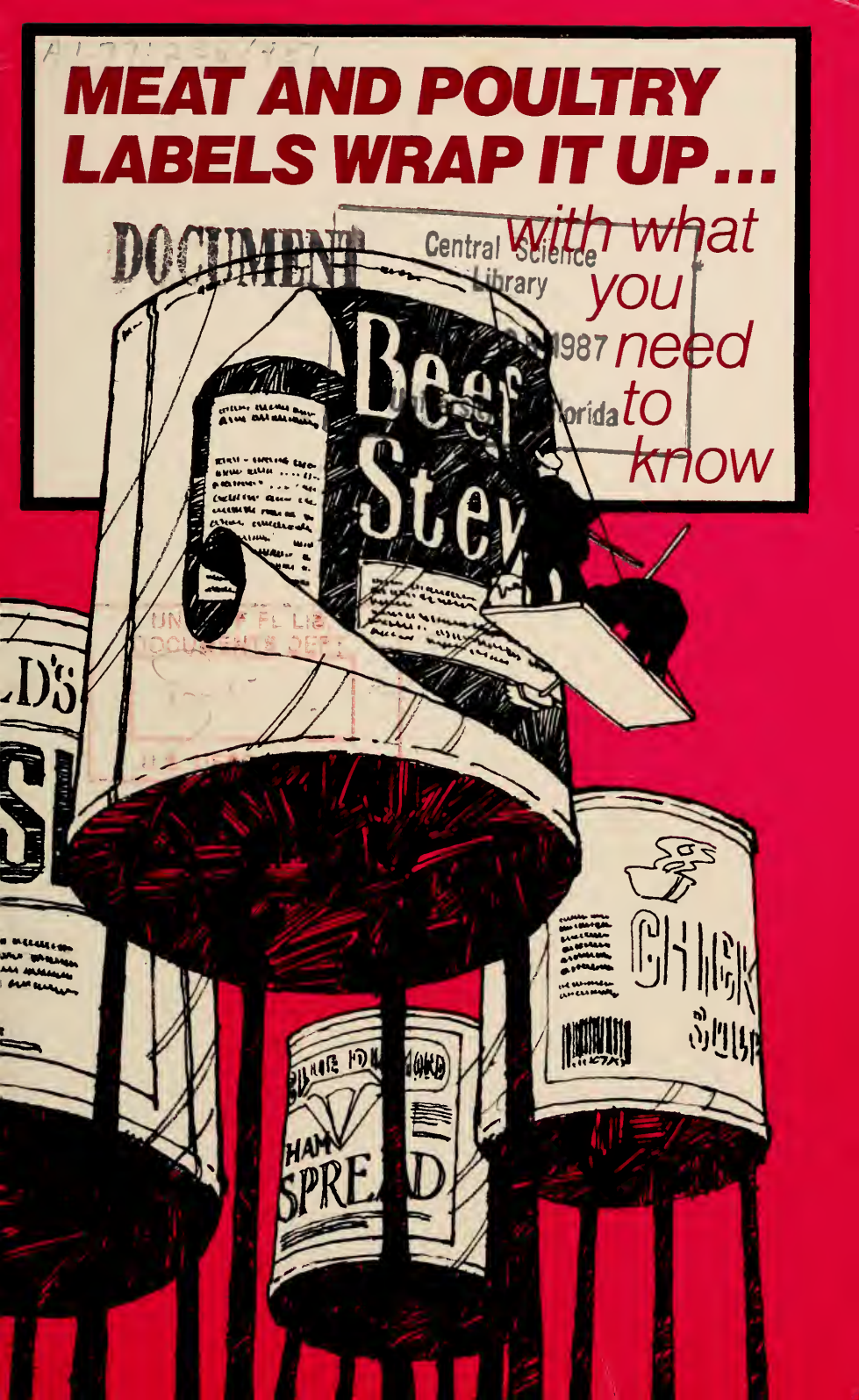
with what you need to know



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Have you read any good meat and poultry labels lately?

Once you find a product in the supermarket — beef stew, for instance, you want to know everything that comes inside the package.

The label wraps it up with what you, the consumer, need to know about the product. If you want to know if the beef stew contains vegetables, or if it contains more beef than stew or more stew than beef — it's all on the label.

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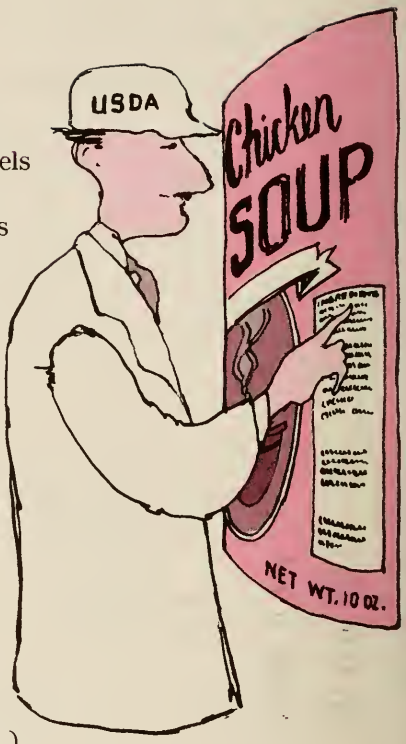
Who approves the label?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) approves labels for all products that contain at least 2 percent poultry or 3 percent meat. This is part of the Federal meat and poultry inspection program. Labels for other products are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

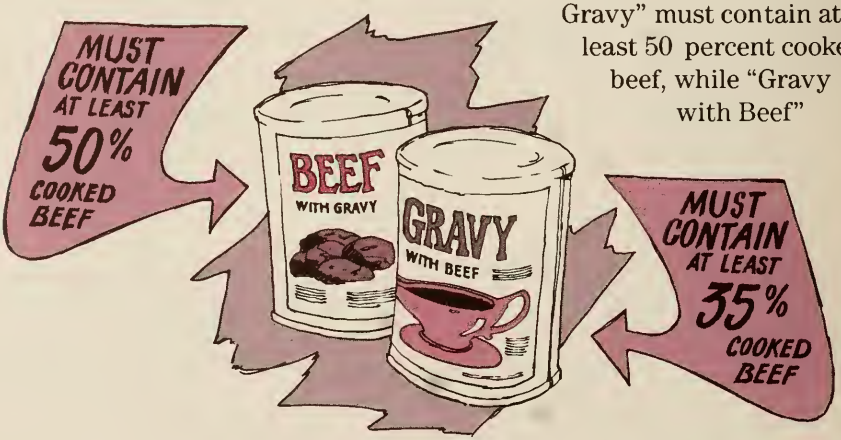


Seven things must be on a label before USDA will approve it: (1) the product name, (2) a list of its ingredients, (3) its weight, (4) the official USDA inspection stamp, (5) the number of the plant where it was produced, (6) the producer's or distributor's name and address, and (7) handling instructions, if the product is perishable. (See "Six Steps to Easy Label Reading" which shows where you can find all this on the label.)

Many manufacturers include more information on the label. You may see handling, storing, and cooking directions, for instance. Some have cooking tips, suggested menus, and nutrition information.

Giving the product a name

USDA sets standards for how much meat and poultry must be in items using certain names. For example, "Beef with Gravy" must contain at least 50 percent cooked beef, while "Gravy with Beef"



contains only 35 percent cooked beef. Meat and poultry processors may add more meat or poultry than is required in a product. However, if less than the required amount is added, the processors must give the product a different name.

USDA standards also limit the amount of fat, moisture, and other ingredients that can be added to meat and poultry products. The chart below gives standards for some popular meat and poultry products.

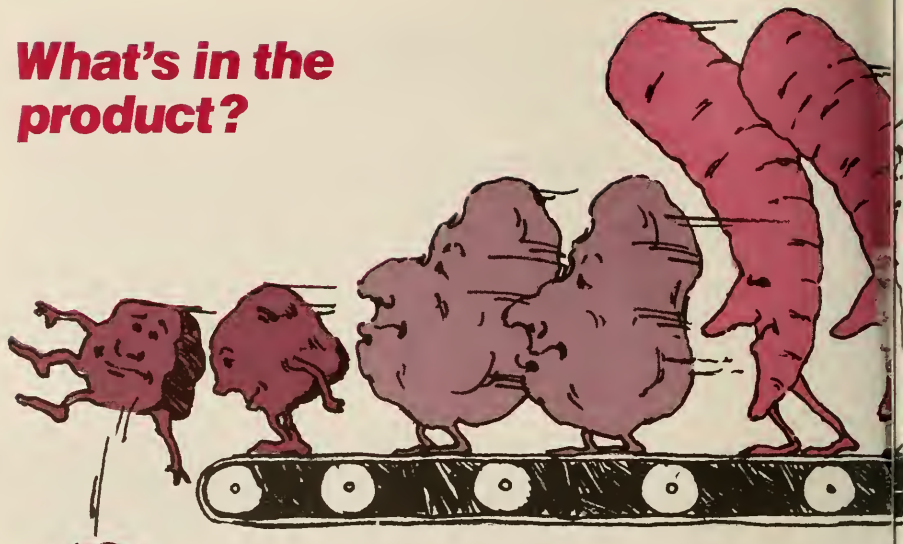
The picture on the label strongly influences buyers, so it must be honest, too. If the label shows five slices of beef, at least five must be inside. And when a picture shows fancy extras that are not part of the product, such as cranberry sauce or lemon slices, they must be identified as "suggested servings."

*USDA Standards for Popular Meat and Poultry Products**

Product Name	Standard
Beef Stew	Must contain at least 25% beef.
Chili Con Carne	At least 40% meat.
Chicken Soup	Ready to Eat — at least 2% chicken meat. Condensed — at least 4% chicken meat.
Frankfurter, Bologna and Similar Cooked Sausage	May contain only skeletal meat. No more than 30% fat, 10% added water, and 2% corn syrup. No more than 15% poultry meat.
Frankfurter or Bologna "with Byproducts" or "with Variety Meats"	Same limitations on fat, added water, and corn syrup as products without variety meats. Must contain at least 15% skeletal meat, and the terms "Variety Meats" or "Byproducts" must be part of the product name and in the ingredients list.
Ham-Water Added, Cooked or Cooked and Smoked	Must be from the hind legs of a hog; picnic hams are from the front legs. Both must contain at least 17 percent meat protein (fat-free).
Hamburger, Ground Beef, or Chopped Beef	No more than 30% fat; no extenders or other added substances except seasonings.
Nuggets	Bite-size, solid pieces of meat and poultry. Usually breaded and deep fat fried.
Nuggets, Chopped and Formed	Meat or poultry chopped and shaped into nuggets. "Chopped and Formed" must be part of the product name.
Pizza with Sausage	At least 12% cooked sausage or 10% dry sausage, such as pepperoni.
Turkey Pie	At least 14% cooked turkey meat.
Turkey Ham	Cured turkey thigh meat.

*Standards for over 200 popular meat and poultry products are listed in USDA's publication, "Meat and Poultry Products — A Consumer Guide to Content and Labeling Requirements." To order the publication, see page 15.

What's in the product?



All ingredients used in the product recipe must be listed in the ingredients statement. The main ingredient comes *first.* Others, including additives, follow in order by weight.

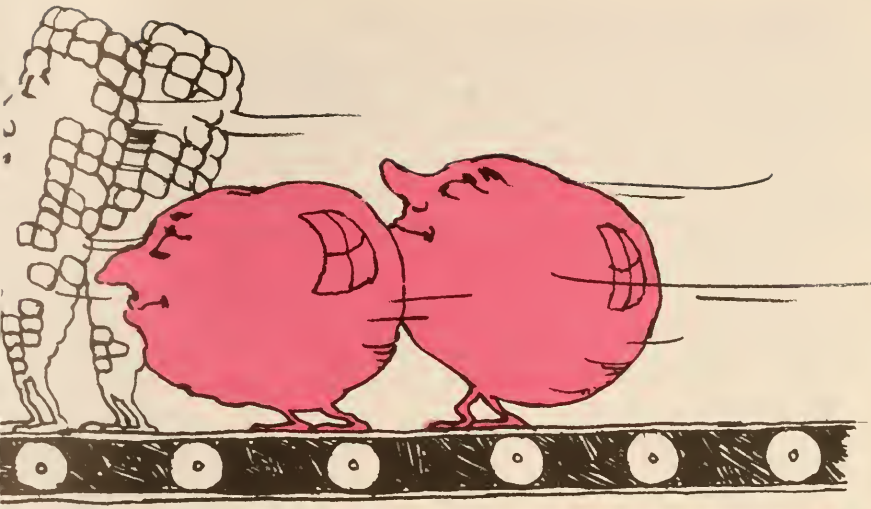
Additives such as natural spices and flavorings can be listed as a group — "spices" or "flavorings." However, preservatives, artificial flavorings or colors, and other additives must each be named.

Why are additives used in meat and poultry products?

Additives have been used in food throughout history. Salt has long been used to preserve meat. Sugar and corn syrup are also widely used.

Additives serve many purposes in foods. They prevent salad dressing from separating, salt from becoming lumpy, and packaged good from spoiling on the grocery shelf. They also give margarine its yellow color and keep cured meat safe to eat. But before an additive can be used in a meat or poultry product, it must be approved by USDA.

Consumers who must avoid certain substances in their diet can read product labels and learn the names of additives. On some labels, the purpose for these ingredients may also be listed. The chart on page 5 lists some approved additives that can be found in meat and poultry and the purpose for their use in these products.



Commonly Used Additives

The term "food additives" raises many eyebrows. Why? Often consumers don't know what they are or why they are used in food. This chart will help take the mystery out of the use of additives in meat and poultry products.

Functions in Foods	Some Commonly Used Additives	Foods in Which Additives are Used
Acidifiers increase acid levels in products to improve flavor and texture.	Acetic acid (vinegar) Citric acid Lactic acid Phosphoric acid	Fresh and cooked sausage.
Antioxidants prevent rancidity.	BHA/BHT Butylated hydroxyanisole/ Butylated hydroxytoluene TBHQ (Tertiary butylhydroquinone) Propyl gallate	Fresh pork, beef, and Italian sausages; some beef patties; margarine and oleomargarine.
Binders thicken ingredients and extend product.	Isolated soy protein Dry whey Sodium caseinate Algin	Sausage, imitation sausage, some meat loaves, soups and stews Breading mix and sauces
Curing agents improve color and taste.	Sodium nitrite Sodium ascorbate	Frankfurters, salami, bacon, bologna, and other cured meat and poultry products.
Flavoring agents impart desired flavor.	Corn syrup Dextrose	Sausage, frankfurters, meat loaf, luncheon meat, and chopped and pressed ham.

How nutritious is it? While more and more labels are providing nutrition information for consumers, it is not usually required on meat and poultry products. Products bearing special claims such as "low-calorie" and "low sodium" are exceptions; processors must explain what these claims mean. The low-calorie label, for instance, must prove its value to dieters. To do this, some manufacturers list the calories, protein, carbohydrates and fat in a single product serving. This is called the short nutrition list.

Others may use a longer nutrition list that gives basic information in the short list, plus a chart on the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA's). The U.S. RDA's show what percentage of the daily recommended amounts of protein and certain vitamins and minerals you can get in a single serving.

Here are other popular claims that may be seen on meat and poultry products.

- **"Natural"** means that the meat or poultry product is minimally processed and that it contains no artificial flavors, colors, or preservatives.

- **"Imitation"** is used on products made to resemble or substitute for other products. "Imitation sausage" for instance, must appear on products that look like sausage, but do not contain the specific ingredients required by USDA product standards.

"The irradiation logo"

- **"Irradiation"** is a newly approved process for controlling certain microorganisms in some meat products. Irradiated foods must be labeled "treated with radiation" or "treated by irradiation," and the irradiation logo must be shown on the label.

- Various sodium claims appear on products with reduced sodium contents. These claims are based on the amount of sodium in a serving size. Processors must use one of the following:

"Sodium Free" or "Salt Free" — products must contain 5 milligrams (mg.) or less sodium per serving.

"Very Low Sodium" — products must contain 35 mg. or less sodium per serving.

"Low Sodium" — products must contain 140 mg. or less sodium per serving.

"Unsalted" or "No Salt Added" — products processed without

salt. **Caution:** These products may contain other sources of sodium such as monosodium glutamate. Check the ingredient statement.

"Reduced Sodium" — products must contain 75 percent less sodium than the traditional product.

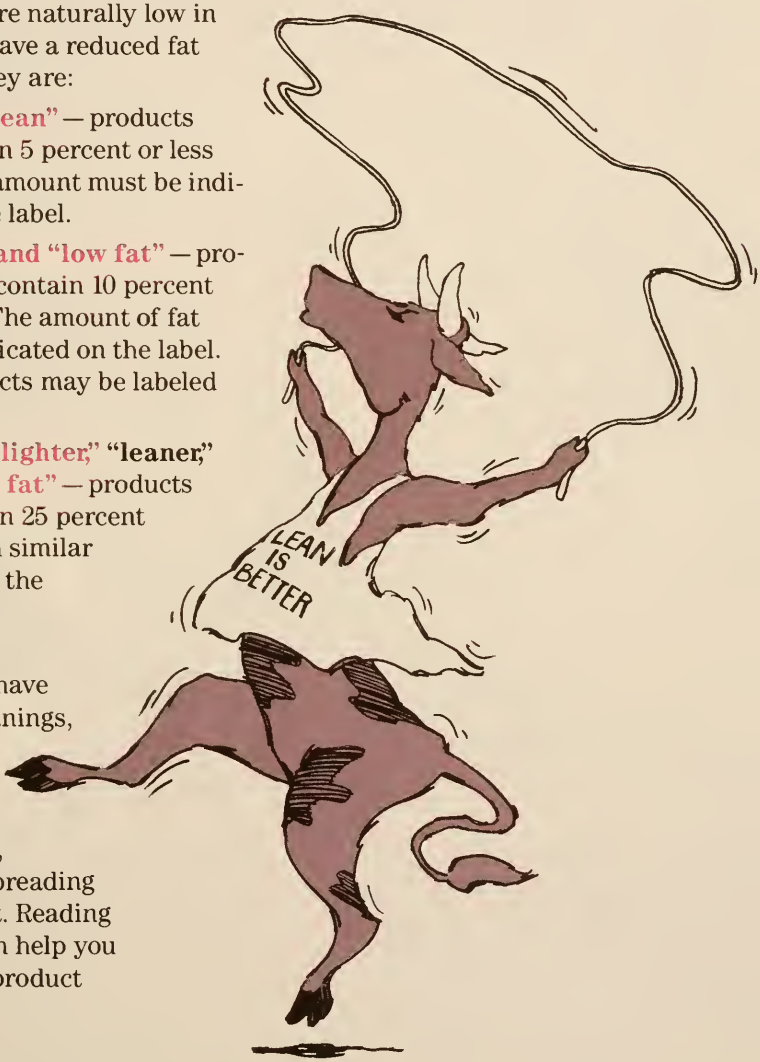
"Lower or Less Salt or Sodium" — products must contain at least 25 percent less sodium than the traditional product.

- Fat claims are used on products that are naturally low in fat or that have a reduced fat content. They are:

"Extra lean" — products must contain 5 percent or less fat. Actual amount must be indicated on the label.

"Lean" and "low fat" — products must contain 10 percent or less fat. The amount of fat must be indicated on the label. Some products may be labeled "Lite."*

"Lite," "lighter," "leaner," and "lower fat" — products must contain 25 percent less fat than similar products on the market.



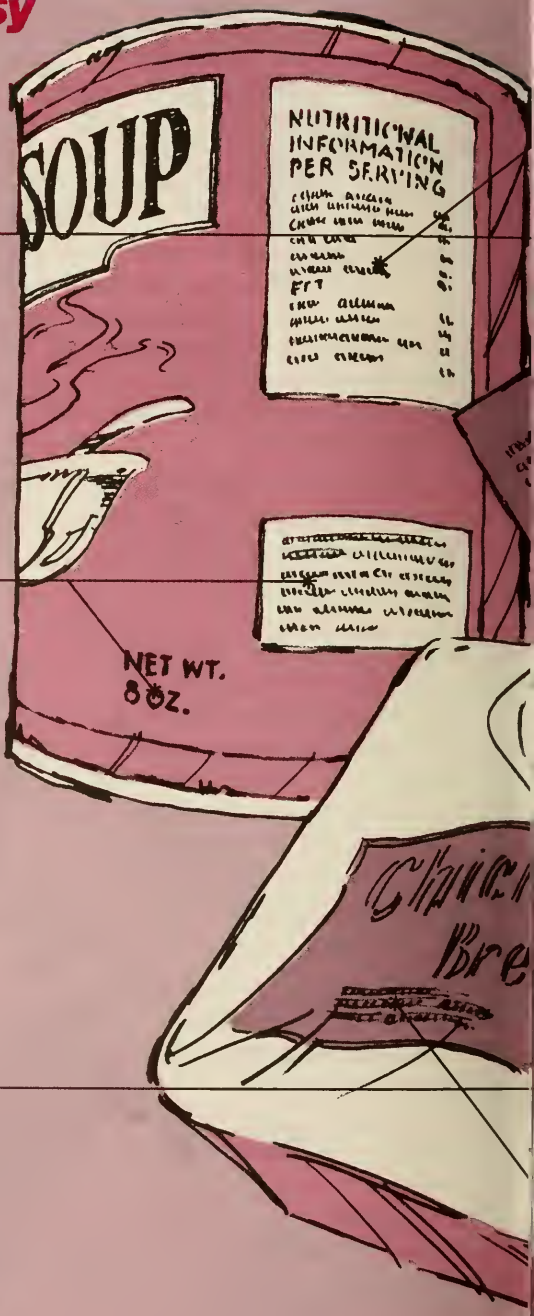
*"Lite" can have various meanings, including a reduction in fat, calories, sodium, or breading of a product. Reading the label can help you choose the product you want.

Six Steps to Easy Label Reading

1. **Product Names and Illustration**— Your first clues to choosing the product you want.

2. **Ingredients and Net Weight**— tell what's in the product recipe and how much is in the container.

3. **Inspection Mark**— says the product has been inspected.



4. **Nutrition Information**— Check the nutrition list to see if the product is right for your diet.

5. **Special Handling Instructions and Dating**— Follow directions and use dates for safe keeping of products.

6. **Company name and lot number**— are important references for handling "problem" products.

Inspection mark says it's safe

From the farm to the grocery store, USDA inspectors check meat and poultry to ensure that safely prepared, properly labeled products reach consumers. The official USDA inspection mark or stamp is your proof that the product was inspected.

You can find the inspection stamp on processed meat and on poultry products such as canned beef stew and chicken franks.

The stamps include the number of the plant in which the product was produced. The plant number is preceded with the letters "EST." for "establishment" on processed meats, and with the letter "P" on poultry. This data makes it easy for USDA to refer to the plant that produced the product should a problem occur.

Although, it is not part of the inspection stamp, the **name and address of the company** that made the product must also appear on the label. This is the company you can contact if you have a problem or question about the product. To help you, the company may ask specific information about the product, such as the lot or batch number if it's included on the package and the net weight.

The lot or batch number tells on what day and on what shift the products were produced. If the products are recalled from the market, the numbers identify the lots.

The **net weight** tells the weight of the contents inside the container. It must be on the label and can be shown in pounds or fluid ounces.

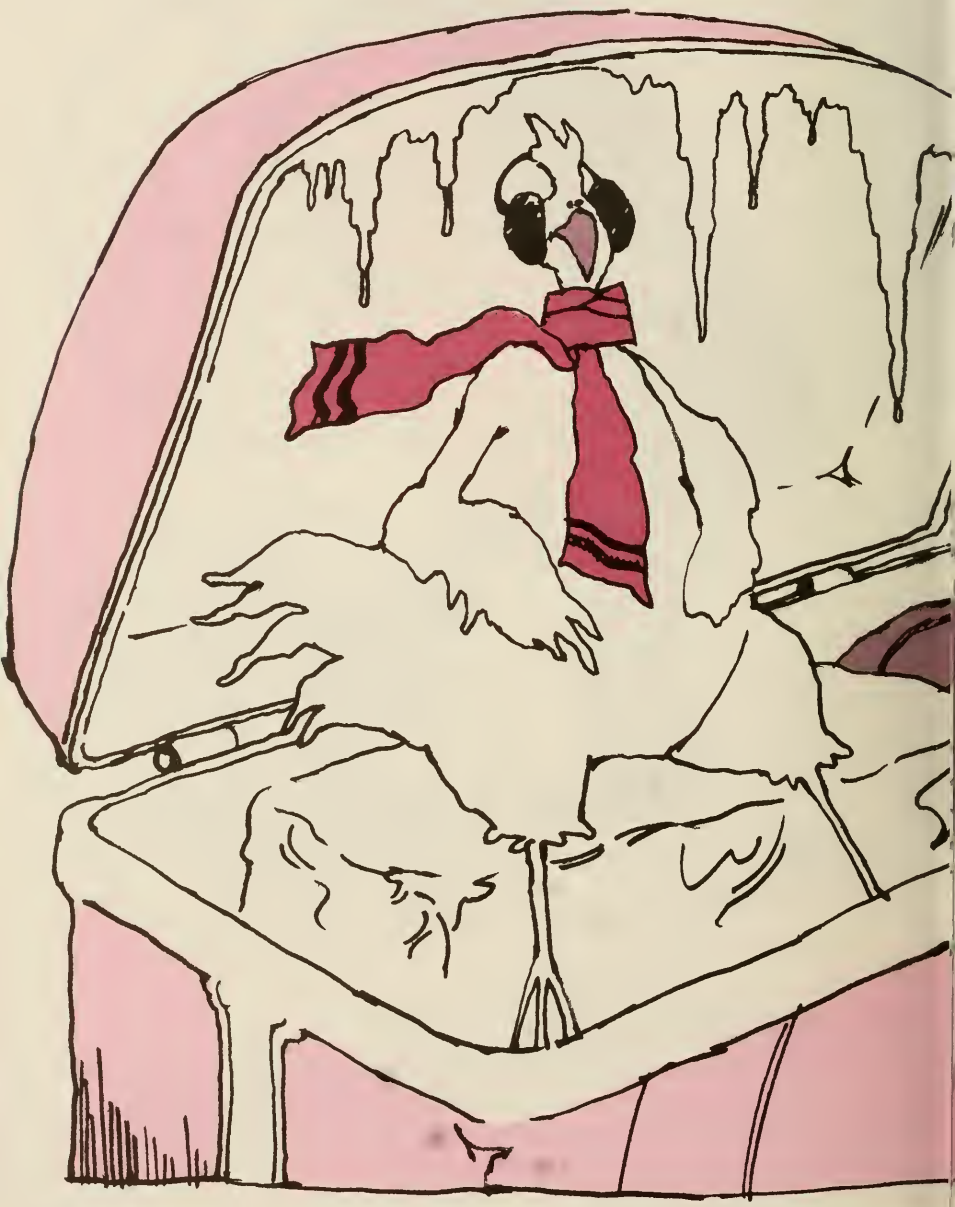
State-inspected products

Some products are inspected by inspection programs run by States. State-inspected products must meet standards equal to those of the Federal Government. These products must show a State inspection mark and can be sold only within that State.

Dates and handling instructions

Many products have dates on them, even though **dating** is optional. The date stamped on product packages can indicate product freshness and can serve as a guide to safe storage time, provided consumers know how to use it.

What do they mean? The "Sell-by" date is the last day the product should be sold.



The "Use-by" date tells you how long the product will retain top eating quality after you buy it.

Some products may have an "Expiration Date," which tells you the last day the food should be eaten or used.

Canned and packaged foods have "Pack" dates which tell you when the product was processed.

Following **handling instructions** is the best way to ensure products remain safe to eat. Today the packaging of products that need refrigeration is similar to packaging for products that can be stored on the shelf. Therefore, it is necessary to follow the directions on the label to make sure you handle the product properly.

All perishable products must give handling instructions, such as "Keep Frozen" or "Keep Refrigerated." Some meat and poultry products may be labeled "Ready-to-Eat" or "Fully Cooked," which means no further cooking is necessary. Other product labels may have directions on how long and at what temperature to cook a product. These directions are not required nor verified by USDA. When cooking instructions are not included on the label, your best bet is to thoroughly cook the product.

Other Questions About Meat and Poultry Labels?

Call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline *800-535-4555**

*Washington, D.C. area residents call 447-3333**

Staffed by home economists, the hotline operates weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., eastern time. Our hotline experts can help you better understand meat and poultry labels, and answer your questions on the proper handling of meat and poultry to keep them safe to eat.

They can also tell you how to handle problems with meat and poultry products.

To report a problem product, first refrigerate it — if possible, in the original container. Second, notify the store where you bought it. Then call the Hotline. They'll tell you what you should do, and whether health authorities should be notified.

You can also write to:

The Meat and Poultry Hotline
USDA-FSIS, Rm. 1165-S
Washington, D.C. 20250

*These numbers are accessible by Telecommunications Devices for the Deaf.

For More Labeling Information, You Can Order:

1. FSIS Facts — Food Additives, FSIS-16, March 1982.
2. Meat and Poultry Products — A Consumer Guide to Content and Labeling Requirements. Home and Garden Bulletin No. 236, July 1981.

For Information on the Safe Handling of Meat and Poultry, You Can Order:

1. **THE SAFE FOOD BOOK** — Your Kitchen Guide. Home & Garden Bulletin No. 241, December 1984.

2. **TALKING ABOUT TURKEY** — How to Buy, Store, Thaw, Stuff, and Prepare Your Holiday Bird. Home & Garden Bulletin No. 243, July 1984.

3. **SAFE FOOD TO GO** — A Guide to Packing Lunches, Picnicking & Camping Out. Home & Garden Bulletin No. 242, November 1985.

Single free copies of the publications are available from:
FSIS Publications Office,
USDA, Rm. 1165-S
Washington, D.C. 20250

Binders and Extenders — help to hold a meat or poultry product together and also aid in retaining product moisture.

Curing — is often done by adding a limited amount of nitrite in combination with salt during processing. These curing ingredients give products, such as bacon and turkey ham, their characteristic taste and color.

Skeletal Meat — refers to muscular tissues that remain attached to the animal's bone structure when muscles used for major meat cuts are removed.

Meat Byproducts (also called "Variety Meats") — are the edible animal parts other than the muscle and skeletal meat. When variety meats, such as organ meat, are used in products, the terms "Meat Byproducts" or "Variety Meats," are included in the product name.

Rancidity — occurs when fat is exposed to oxygen. Exposure to oxygen causes fat molecules to break down quickly resulting in a stale, rancid odor in the product. Antioxidants, such as BHA and BHT, are used to slow this process and extend the shelf-life of meat and poultry products.

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